

# Metropolitan Police Academy



## 13.3 Tow Cranes

Approved 4/26/2023

### 13.3.1 Define key terms related to tow cranes

MPD uses a variety of different towing-related terms and tows vehicles for a variety of reasons. Some vehicles are simply disabled (broken-down) or involved in a traffic crash, while others have been seized, forfeited, abandoned, or contain items of evidence. Each type of vehicle is recovered and documented in a different way, using the following terminology:

- **Regular Crane:** What are ordinarily referred to as “tow trucks,” we call a crane. A regular crane is the most common tow crane. It ordinarily lifts a vehicle’s front axle and tows the vehicle on its rear wheels. These are used on a frequent basis by MPD officers.
- **Flat Bed Crane:** In some cases, especially traffic crash scenes in which a vehicle receives extensive damage or a large vehicle requires a tow, a flatbed crane will be needed. These cranes load the entire vehicle onto the bed of a larger truck and can often carry two vehicles.

When requesting a tow crane, the dispatcher will normally ask you which of these two types you need, a flatbed or regular.

- **MPD Crane:** MPD uses both private towing companies and MPD-owned government tow cranes. Members may inquire about the availability of an MPD crane prior to requesting a private towing company to respond.

#### **Towing Control Number (TCN)**

All requests for tow cranes are made to and recorded at the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). A unique towing control number corresponding to the tow will be issued. TCNs allow the Department of Public Works (DPW) to track and locate all towed vehicles. Members should retrieve this number from the dispatcher and record it in the police report to document what company towed the vehicle, what vehicle was towed, and where the vehicle was taken.

The tow crane operator should have the TCN. Tow crane drivers are given a TCN so that you can ensure they were dispatched by OUC. Confirm this number with the tow crane operator prior to the moving of any vehicle to ensure that the appropriate tow crane takes possession of the vehicle.

Towing vehicles is a lucrative business and in order to avoid favoritism, assignments are dispatched to tow crane drivers in a rotational order. When you are on the scene awaiting the arrival of a tow crane, the driver is allotted thirty (30) minutes to arrive. Should he or she fail to arrive in that time period, you may request that the dispatcher send the next tow crane company on the list.

In the case of a traffic crash, a report narrative may read, “Vehicle 1 suffered damage to the front bumper and front driver’s side wheel well. It was towed by Edmond’s Towing to 1234 Benning Road, NE. TCN 20151234567,”

DPW performs a routine audit of TCNs to ensure contract tow cranes are abiding by their contracts.

TCNs must be included in RMS reports and on the Property Records Form (PD 81).

### **Impoundment**

When any agency of the District of Columbia takes a vehicle into custody for reasons of penalty, safekeeping, forfeiture, or evidence, the vehicle is considered to be impounded.

### **Safekeeping**

MPD recovers various items of property in a “safekeeping” capacity which is the recovery and storage of an item in a protected place. This is usually a temporary status until an investigation reveals that the item is evidence, abandoned, or another status. Vehicles are also recovered for safekeeping. For example, an unoccupied and running vehicle left in the roadway with a damaged ignition may be suspected of being stolen. If a check reveals that the vehicle has not been reported stolen, it may be recovered for safekeeping and the classification will later be changed after contacting the owner and confirming that the vehicle was stolen.

### **Forfeiture**

This category refers to a vehicle or other item of property seized by the District of Columbia as a result of its connection to illegal activities. Forfeiture is often used with drug trafficking cases in which the suspect’s assets related to the offense are seized, not just as evidence but to permit a civil forfeiture proceeding. For instance, an illegal drug trafficking scheme in which drugs are being transported and sold out of vehicles may result in the forfeiture of those vehicles at the conclusion of the investigation.

## **13.3.2 Outline departmental procedures for taking vehicles into departmental custody**

All requests for towing must be made through the Office of Unified Communications (OUC) and include the following information:

- Location of the vehicle.
- Category of the towing request.
- Number of vehicles to be towed.
- Make, model, and tag number of each vehicle.
- Type of crane(s) needed.
- Position of each vehicle (e.g., on roadway, off roadway, etc.).

As noted above, officers shall verify the TCN when the crane arrives on the scene and advise OUC when a crane arrives on the scene. Officers must record the TCN on all official report forms involving the use of a tow crane.

Members should conduct a WALES check (10-29) on all vehicles being towed to obtain any information about the ownership and wanted status of the vehicle. When applicable, members should make efforts to locate and inform vehicle owners as to the location of their towed vehicles.

Finally, members should prepare all applicable NOI, PD form 81/82, and RMS reports.

### 13.3.3 Distinguish the eight categories used to request a tow from OUC

Towing may fall into one of the following categories. Each tow should be requested through OUC (dispatcher) and include the category of the tow.

- **Crash Vehicle** - On the scene of a traffic crash, officers often require the assistance of a tow crane to move vehicles that are inoperable. Cranes are used to remove vehicles from intersections or the roadway to enable the flow of traffic, or to transport a disabled/damaged vehicle to a storage facility to facilitate repairs. The owner may arrange a particular storage/repair facility (at their own expense), or the tow crane will transport the vehicle to its facility where it will later be repaired or transported elsewhere. Members should categorize the vehicle according to the circumstances.

**NOTE:** Tow cranes are required to have proper equipment to sweep up debris from a crash scene. Failure to do so may result in the issuance of an NOI to the driver of the crane. An Acadis module will provide the specific tow-crane related NOIs.

- **Courtesy Service Assistance** - Upon noticing a motorist in need of assistance, members shall offer aid to the extent of their immediate capability. This may involve blocking traffic, placing flares in the roadway, or requesting a tow crane. At the request of an owner/operator, members shall request a tow crane through the dispatcher to transport the vehicle to a particular repair facility. Members are not permitted to recommend any private tow company and must, as always, request this service through OUC or by using the 311 mobile application.
- **Disabled Vehicle** - A disabled vehicle is a vehicle that is not operable. If the operator or responsible person is not present and the disabled vehicle is not causing a safety or traffic concern, then issue the appropriate NOI only. If the operator is present, then treat the situation as a courtesy service. If the disabled vehicle is obstructing traffic, then call for a tow through OUC.
- **Disabled Police Vehicle** - In the event an MPD patrol car breaks down or becomes disabled for any reason, a tow crane should be requested and the vehicle should be relocated to the MPD Fleet Maintenance facility. Notify an MPD official when an MPD vehicle becomes disabled.

#### Police Impoundment

Members may request a tow crane for police impoundment under certain circumstances. For this type of service, an MPD crane *must* be used.

- **Held for civil forfeiture:** Offenses which provide for forfeiture of a vehicle because of its involvement in or relationship to the offense can be impounded by MPD members when specific criteria are met.
- **Evidence:** When it is determined that a vehicle is needed for evidentiary purposes in a criminal proceeding or major traffic crash investigation, such vehicles may be impounded by MPD members.
- **Prisoner property:** When a person arrested for a crime is in possession of a vehicle that is not needed as evidence it may, at times, be handled as a police impoundment. With the arrestee's permission, the vehicle may be left parked legally or turned over to another licensed operator. If this is not possible, or at the request of the arrestee, the vehicle can be handled as a police

impoundment. Either way, the disposition made in the handling of the vehicle should be documented by the officer.

- **Safekeeping:** For any vehicle whose condition, location, or other circumstances give reason to believe that the vehicle is suspected to be stolen, pending verification of its status, part of the estate of deceased or mentally ill individuals, or in need of preservation due to an inability to safeguard property when no person is available to rightfully take custody.
- **Recovered Stolen** - Vehicles recovered by MPD that have been reported stolen or are wanted for any other reason.
- **Relocation** - In some instances, officers will encounter vehicles which are blocking access to private property or escort routes for a motorcade or are parked in violation of Emergency No Parking notices for events or other activities in which legal parking spaces are restricted. Such relocations are conducted by MPD cranes and are requested through OUC. Issue the appropriate NOI and request that the vehicle be moved to a nearby legal parking space. These vehicles are not transported to storage facilities, rather they are moved. Notify teletype of the towed vehicle and its new location.

Types of Relocation Include:

- Rush hour
  - Posted public space
  - Public roadway safety hazard
  - Safety and security precaution
  - Snow emergency route
- **Traffic Violation** - MPD shall only request a traffic violation tow for unregistered vehicles (including automobiles, mopeds, motorcycles, and all-terrain vehicles) and vehicles that are deemed to be unsafe to be operated in the District of Columbia. Traffic violations are generally performed by the DPW, and most impoundments performed by MPD fall under the police impoundment category. When necessary, request a crane through OUC, issue the appropriate NOI, and complete the required forms.

### 13.3.4 Describe how to process a Recovered Stolen Auto assignment

Approximately eighteen (18) vehicles are stolen every day in Washington, DC. Many of these vehicles are later recovered by MPD officers. In some cases, officers will receive a radio assignment for a suspicious vehicle, a traffic complaint, or a recovered stolen auto which leads them to the vehicle. Other times, officers will self-initiate the recovery upon encountering such vehicles while on patrol.

A list of stolen vehicles will be updated and shared with officers each day during roll-call so that officers have knowledge and descriptions of all the stolen vehicles in their respective districts.

There are a number of signs that officers should look for that can lead to recovering a stolen vehicle. These signs include illegally parked or abandoned vehicles, parked vehicles with doors or windows left open, parked vehicles with an accumulation of parking tickets, vehicles left idling in the roadway, vehicles with tags that appear to be tampered with or counterfeit, and vehicles with a damaged ignition, damaged door locks, or a broken window.

Checking the tag and VIN will typically confirm whether the vehicle is stolen. In cases where you suspect that a vehicle is stolen but the inquiry does not confirm that it is, attempt to contact the owner as he or she may not yet be aware that it is stolen or may still be in the process of reporting the vehicle stolen.

When recovering a stolen vehicle, the following steps should be taken:

- **Check and confirm the tag and VIN:** Conduct a WALES inquiry of the tag and VIN through the OUC. This will provide information on the Theft I Stolen Auto offense report that was filed. Researching that report will provide you with information surrounding the offense including the date, time and location of the steal, report numbers, owner information, and contact information. Once the inquiry confirms that the vehicle is stolen, the recovery may begin.
- **Approach the vehicle with caution:** Depending on the circumstances, the vehicle may or may not be occupied. Treat each stolen auto like you would a traffic stop and establish scene safety *prior* to recovering the vehicle. When suspects are present, take appropriate police action.
- **Request a crime scene technician to process the vehicle for evidence:** He or she may be able to recover fingerprints from the vehicle that were left by suspects. This will also document the condition of the vehicle at the time of the recovery.
- **Contact the owner:** When possible, the owner may respond to the scene and take possession of the vehicle. The owner may also report property stolen from the vehicle, damage to the vehicle, and other relevant information about the offense at that time.
- **Turn the vehicle over to the owner or request a tow crane:** If the owner responds to the scene, confirm ownership of the vehicle and the original report. Complete a PD Form 81-A (Property Release) when turning over the vehicle to the owner. If the owner does not retrieve the vehicle or the vehicle is inoperable for any reason, request a tow crane through OUC. The vehicle will then be placed in storage by the towing company awaiting the owner or owner's insurance company to claim and relocate the vehicle. If towed, make an entry on the district property book and staple the towing receipt on the corresponding page.
- **Obtain a CCN, notify Teletype, and complete a report classified as Recovered Stolen Auto Local or Recovered Stolen Auto Interstate:** If the vehicle was stolen and reported in Washington, DC, it is considered local. All vehicles reported stolen elsewhere are considered interstate. Document the details of the event and the disposition. Include the Teletype notification in your narrative section. Teletype will ensure that the recovered vehicle is no longer reported as stolen in WALES.
- **All recovered stolen auto cases involve a police report, teletype notification, and entry on the district property book.**
- **Clear the assignment with a disposition such as "10-8 report submitted" or "10-8 vehicle recovered."**

### 13.3.5 Complete a Recovered Stolen Auto Report

#### (Independent Practice)

### 13.3.6 Describe how to handle tow crane complaints

Officers may encounter citizens who wish to file a complaint regarding the towing of their vehicle. In these cases, officers should assess the complaint to determine the nature, location, and when the incident occurred. Running the tag number may reveal the location that the vehicle was towed or relocated to. Being familiar with the common towing procedures in your respective district can assist in locating a person's vehicle which has been towed or relocated, as well.

- **Contested Towing Complaints:** In some instances, officers will receive complaints in which a person may wish to contest the towing of a vehicle. Officers should attempt to verify the legitimacy of the tow and refer the person to the appropriate agency which initiated the tow. Cases involving an MPD tow should be referred to the respective police district official.
- **Regulatory Complaints:** Complaints about licensing, over-charging, and customer rights shall be referred to DCRA (DC Regulatory Affairs). When a clear violation of towing regulations has occurred, officers shall act to resolve the matter.
- **Authorized Towing Service (ATS) Complaints:** Members receiving complaints regarding the performance or conduct of a tow crane operator or company dispatched for service shall notify an official in order to file the complaint with the MPD towing coordinator.

### Summary

You have just learned the basics of tow crane operations in Washington, DC and completed a simulated recovery of a stolen automobile. With this knowledge, you should be able to appropriately request, categorize, document, and utilize tow cranes while in the field as you handle all types of traffic-related incidents. Vehicles are valuable items of personal property. The recovery of stolen automobiles and the welfare of vehicles are important to community members. Always follow departmental procedures taught in this lesson to ensure that vehicles are towed and relocated in the appropriate manner and document these actions thoroughly so that a record exists of the vehicle's location.

### REFERENCES

GO 201.26	Duties, Responsibilities and Conduct of Members of the Department	04/05/2011
GO 301.03	Vehicle Pursuits	12/30/2021
GO 302.01	Calls for Service	02/16/2022
GO 302.02	Radio Broadcasts and Look-outs	10/26/2012
GO 304.01	Operation and Management of Criminal Investigations	10/11/1987
GO 304.10	Field Contacts, Stops, and Protective Pat Downs	07/09/2019
	Cornell University Law Institute (Open Access)	
	Briefs of Leading Cases in Law Enforcement (Carmen & Walker)	